

March 1, 2012

General Assembly
Labor and Public Employees Committee
Room 3800, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

RE: S.B. 150 – An Act Concerning Family and Medical Leave Benefits for Certain Municipal Employees

Senator Prague, Representative Zalaski, and members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee:

My name is Susan Nelson and I am counsel with CSEA/SEIU, Local 2001, a union that represents 2,500 paraeducators in 34 local and regional public school districts as well as Regional Education Service Centers across Connecticut. For the past several years, I have been negotiating multiple school paraprofessional contracts with local boards of education.

As we all know, the economy is requiring sacrifices from all of us. Paraprofessionals are profoundly impacted by this because of historically low hourly wages in what was once considered a “mom’s job,” together with the limited work opportunities presented by the school calendar of 180 workdays. Paras are being forced to pay enormous percentages of their income for health insurance, on top of accepting zero percent wage increases in many communities.

During negotiations a couple of years ago, I learned that one of our negotiating committee members had been denied family leave because she is not covered by the law. It turns out that most school paraprofessionals are excluded from FMLA coverage because they are just shy of the 1,250 minimum annual hours required to be worked. This means that full time school employees can be denied the right to return to their jobs after taking leave to care for family or to undergo medical treatment. This is simply wrong, and cannot have been intended or understood at the time the law was first adopted.

Accordingly, we have proposed several times to add contract language that would extend this right to paraprofessionals in our bargaining unit without success. Legislative action is the only way to right this situation.

There is virtually no economic impact to school districts as a result of considering paras eligible for FMLA. In fact, the maximum exposure financially would be three months of the employer contribution to health insurance for the employee on leave. Quite frankly, the inconvenience of scheduling substitutes or juggling assignments does not justify the hardship placed on paraprofessionals by this inequity. Moreover, school administrators are already accommodating the rest of their regular employees who work at least 1,250 hours annually with FMLA, and are presumably set up to deal with it.

There is no reason not pass S.B. 150 and we strongly encourage you to do so.

Susan Nelson
Counsel, CSEA/SEIU, Local 2001